



## When is it time? Euthanasia

Pets are an integral part of our lives and bring us love, joy and companionship for many years. Unfortunately, the life span of our four-legged friends is much shorter than ours as humans, resulting in loss of multiple pets in our lifetime. One of the hardest decisions we make as pet owners is the decision to let them go. As one of the most common questions in veterinary medicine, this article will hopefully give some insight in guiding you through this difficult decision.

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### Age is not a disease, but things happen as our pets age.

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#### Quality of Life

The most common questions asked about our sick or geriatric pets:

- Is my pet in pain or suffering?
- When is it time to put my pet down?

These questions can be very difficult to answer as veterinarians, as there are multiple factors that must be considered. Also, family members with differing opinions or philosophies may be involved, further complicating the decision. It takes time to work through the process of letting go.

As mentioned above, age is not a disease. Just because you have an older pet does not mean it needs to be euthanized. On that same note, your pet has given you years of unconditional companionship and we do not want them suffering through their last days. Put yourself in their place and ask: Is this how I would want to live?

Quality of life is different for every pet and owner. There are several aspects of our pet's life that must be considered when making the decision to euthanize. Several are listed below.

- **Breed** - Certain breeds develop disease processes that may affect quality that you may not see in other breeds. For example, an arthritic small breed dog will be able to compensate better and may have better quality than an arthritic large breed dog. Therefore, euthanizing a severely arthritic large breed dog may be indicated sooner than an indoor small breed dog.
- **Behavior** – Aggression is a difficult behavior to manage and causes the most controversy and family disagreements when contemplating euthanasia. Aggression towards humans is extremely important to address as serious injury, even death, can occur. Work with your veterinarian for case-by-case guidance on behavior issues.
- **Lifestyle** - The lifestyle of your pet plays a major role in your decision to euthanize. Many large breed dogs are working dogs and have been trained to perform a task. If they are unable to perform their task, many become depressed and their quality of life rapidly declines after retirement. A small breed indoor pet, however, that has not endured strenuous activity on their body, but rather is a lap dog, may maintain quality much longer.
- **Diseases** - Some diseases are extremely painful and have no cure or require expensive treatments that put our pets through painful procedures and incur increased costs to the owners. Other disease processes can be managed well and your pet can live a long, comfortable life with great quality. Your veterinarian will help with the long-term treatment and prognosis for each disease process.
- **Mentation** - Mentally, pets should interact with us and our families. The aging brain is very common in our older pets and can be stressful to owners that witness this situation. Dementia is very common and needs to be recognized by the owner. Monitor your pet for aimless pacing, staring, barking at the wall, and being lost.
- **Appetite** – Appetite is a great indicator of how our pets feel. It is a good sign if they feel good enough to eat. Loss of the drive to eat is one of the first things that may indicate your pet is declining in health.

Despite all the above factors, there are a few quality-of-life criteria that should be considered for any pet:

1. Is your pet comfortable? (Not in constant distress, pain, vomiting, diarrhea, coughing, seizures, etc.)
2. Is your pet mentally alert? (Not staring and barking at the wall, getting lost in the house)
3. Is your pet interacting with the family?
4. Is your pet still enjoying their favorite activities?
5. Is your pet eating daily?
6. Is your pet able to stand, walk and use the restroom on its own?
7. Is your pet's disease process managed well with medications?

If you answered "No" to most of the above questions, euthanasia may be the best option for your pet.

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The most important question to ask

## **Is my pet having more bad days than good days?**

If "Yes", then it's time.

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### **Euthanasia** - The procedure.

Once the decision has been made to euthanize, you have the option to be present or not. The procedure will be performed on the exam table or floor depending on the size and comfort level of the pet. Access to a front leg is needed and a technician will be present to help hold the leg in position. If you will remain present for the procedure, the staff and I will position ourselves to allow you access to comfort your pet through the procedure. A tourniquet will be placed above the elbow and the hair clipped to facilitate exposure of the vein. Euthanasia solution will be injected into the vein and the pet will pass away peacefully in seconds to minutes.

A few things that can happen and may occur during the euthanasia procedure:

- Deep breaths
- Stiffness followed by relaxation
- Gasping
- Vocalization
- Urination
- Defecation
- Eyes will remain open

There is the option to sedate your pet before the euthanasia solution is administered and is usually given to nervous, anxious or aggressive pets before the procedure. Every veterinary clinic's protocol is slightly different, so ask the staff or veterinarian the options before the procedure.

### **Visitation** – Private time with your pet.

If desired, after the euthanasia has been performed and confirmation the heart has stopped, the staff will step out and allow you to spend time with your pet alone. Options for paw prints of your pet are available and can be displayed, framed, placed in a scrapbook, or stored away for your memories. Each facility may offer slightly different keepsake items to remember your pet.

### **Aftercare** - Plans for the body

- Cremation – If available, cremation services may be offered and have two basic options:
  - Communal Cremation – Your pet is cremated, but no ashes are returned to the owner.
  - Private Cremation – Your pet will be placed in an individual tray and their ashes are returned to the owner. The owner is called when the ashes have returned for pick-up in about 1-2 weeks.
- Home Burial – If local laws and regulations allow and you have a place to bury your pet, you can take them with you after the euthanasia. It is very common for bodily fluids to leak from your pet as the muscles relax. You have the option to wrap your pet in a blanket that you provide, or options are provided to protect you and your belongings from the bodily fluids.
- Donate for Research – Some veterinary clinics are involved in research projects aimed to advance the technology of veterinary medicine. Donating your pet's body to science helps improve multiple aspects of veterinary medicine. Your pet is handled with utmost respect and may help create medical and surgical advancements that save other pet's lives. Talk to your veterinarian if you have any questions about this option.

Euthanasia is a permanent pain-relieving procedure for our suffering pets. The hope is this article gives you some information to help guide you through this difficult decision. If you have questions or still need some consultation, contact your veterinarian.

